

Public transit in rural communities: A research perspective

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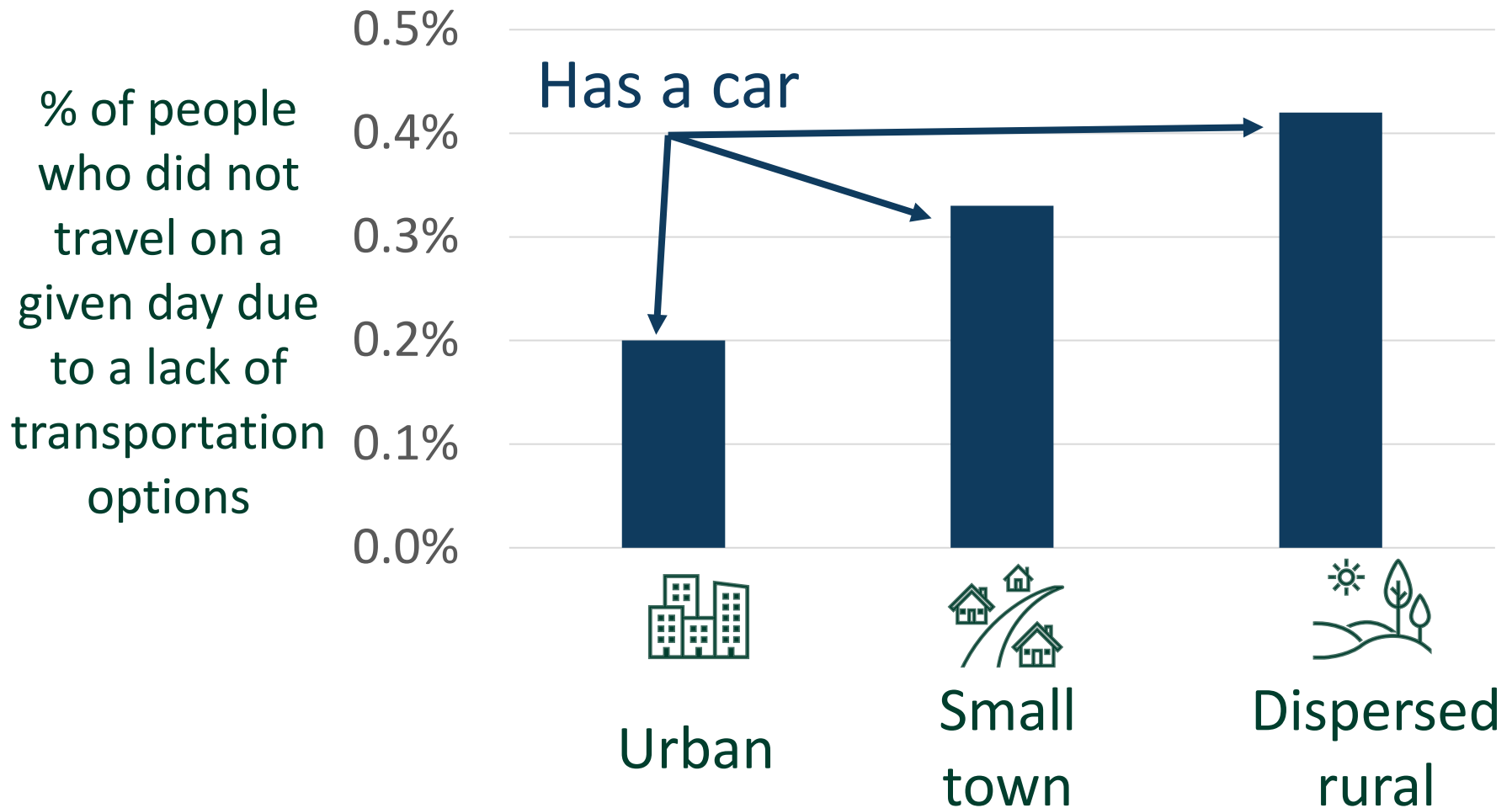
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Council of State Governments East Rural Policy Summit

April 5, 2025

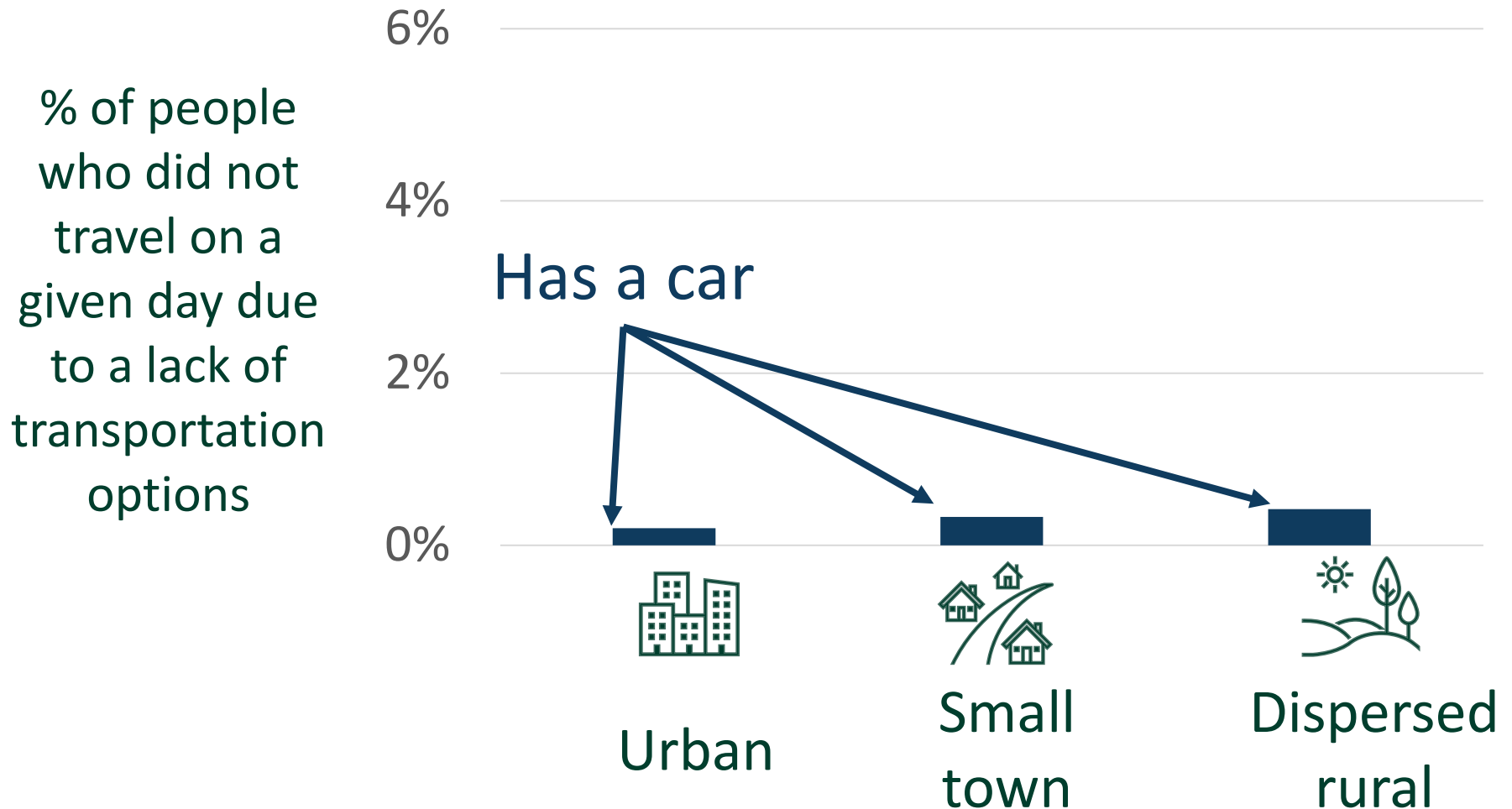


University of Vermont
Transportation Research Center

Rural Americans are more likely to experience unmet travel needs

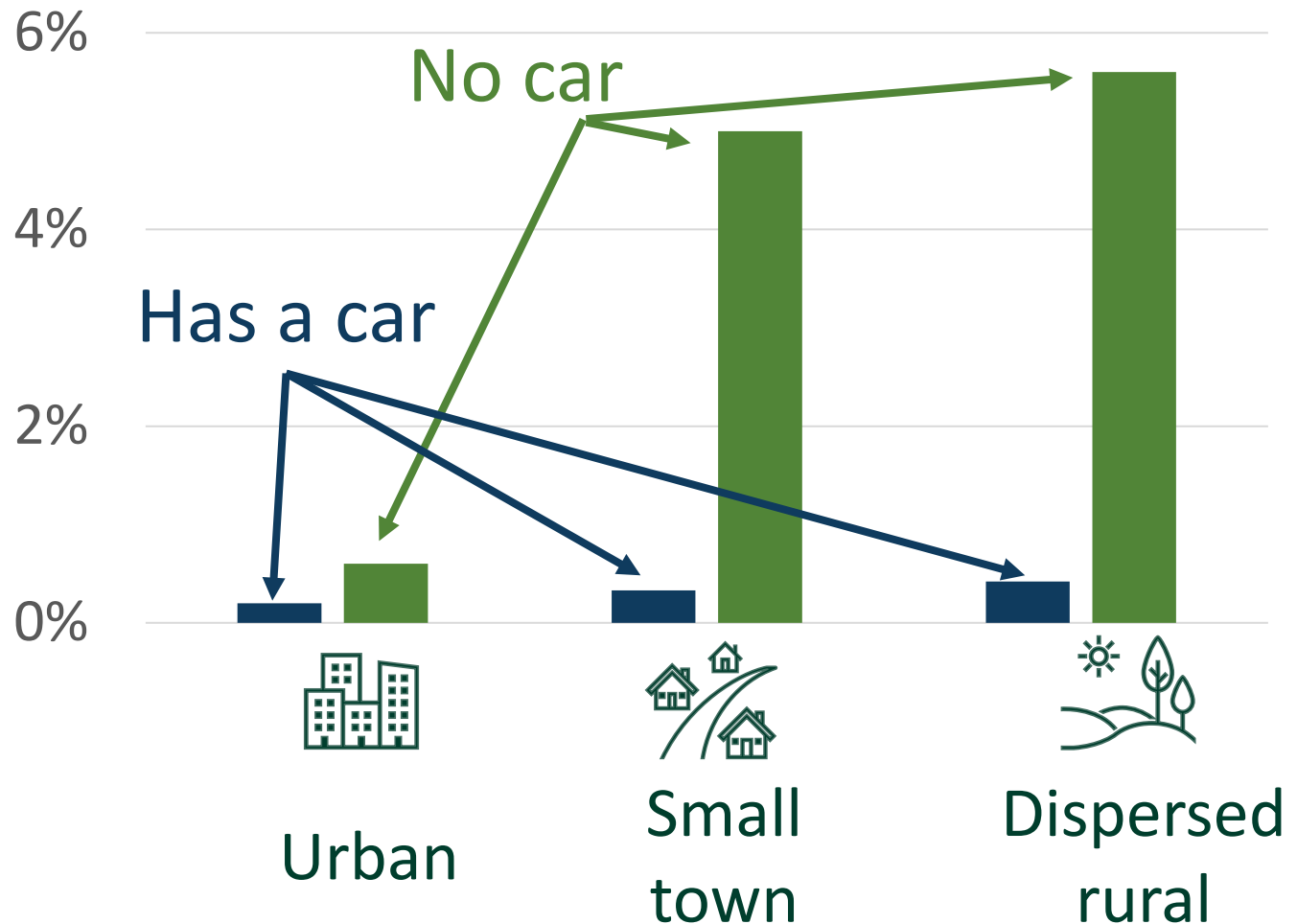


Rural Americans are more likely to experience unmet travel needs

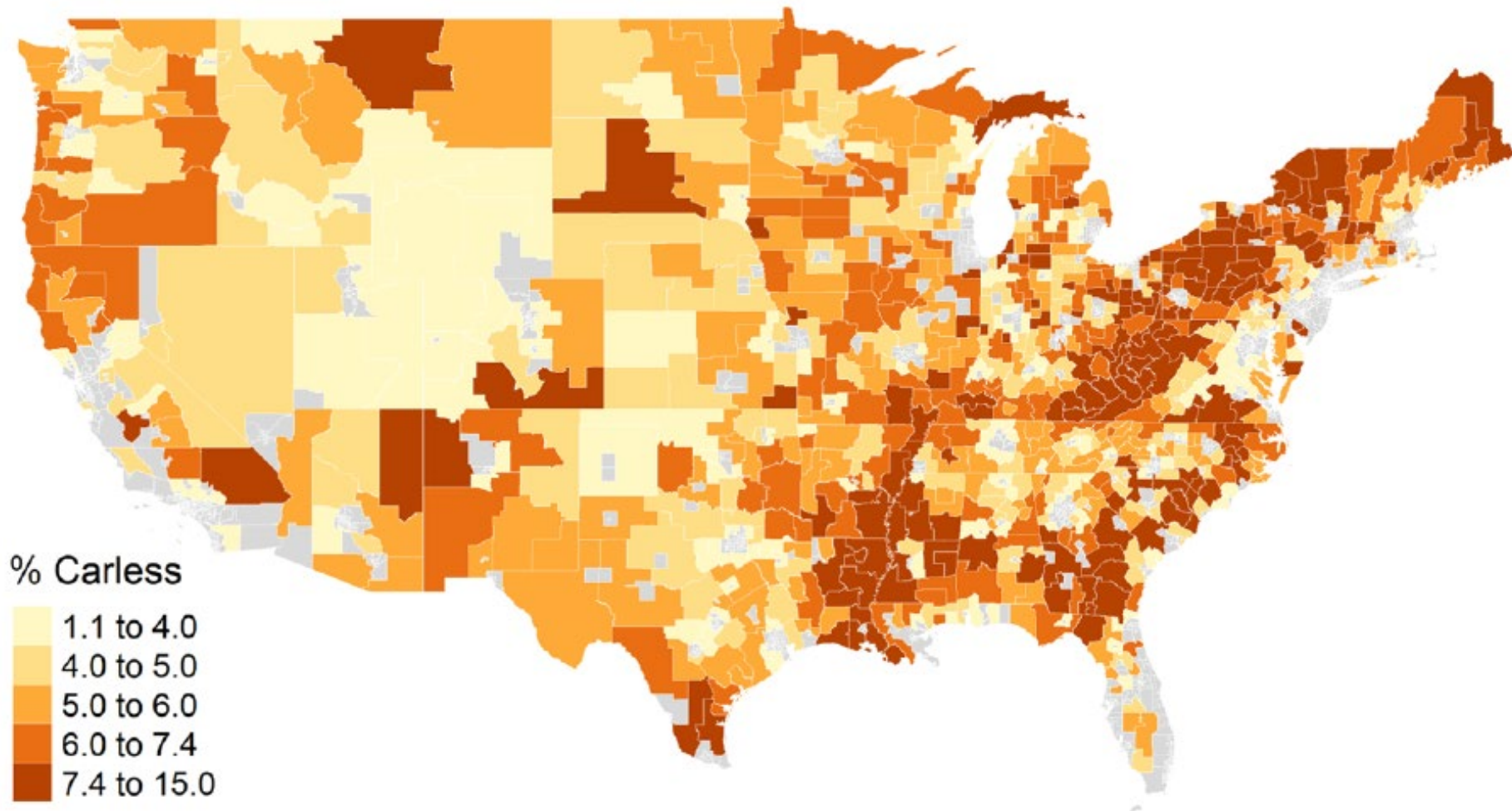


Rural Americans are more likely to experience unmet travel needs

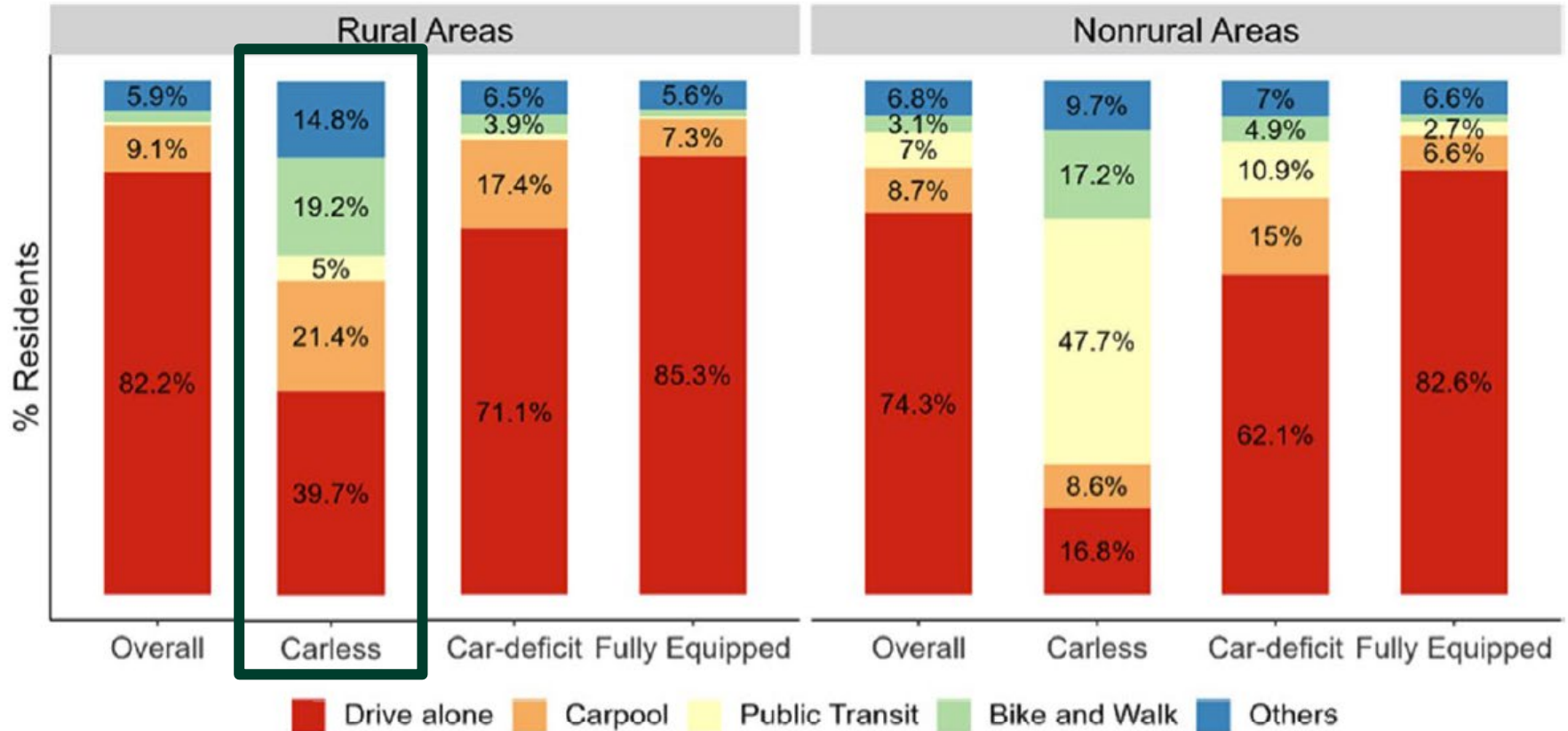
% of people who did not travel on a given day due to a lack of transportation options



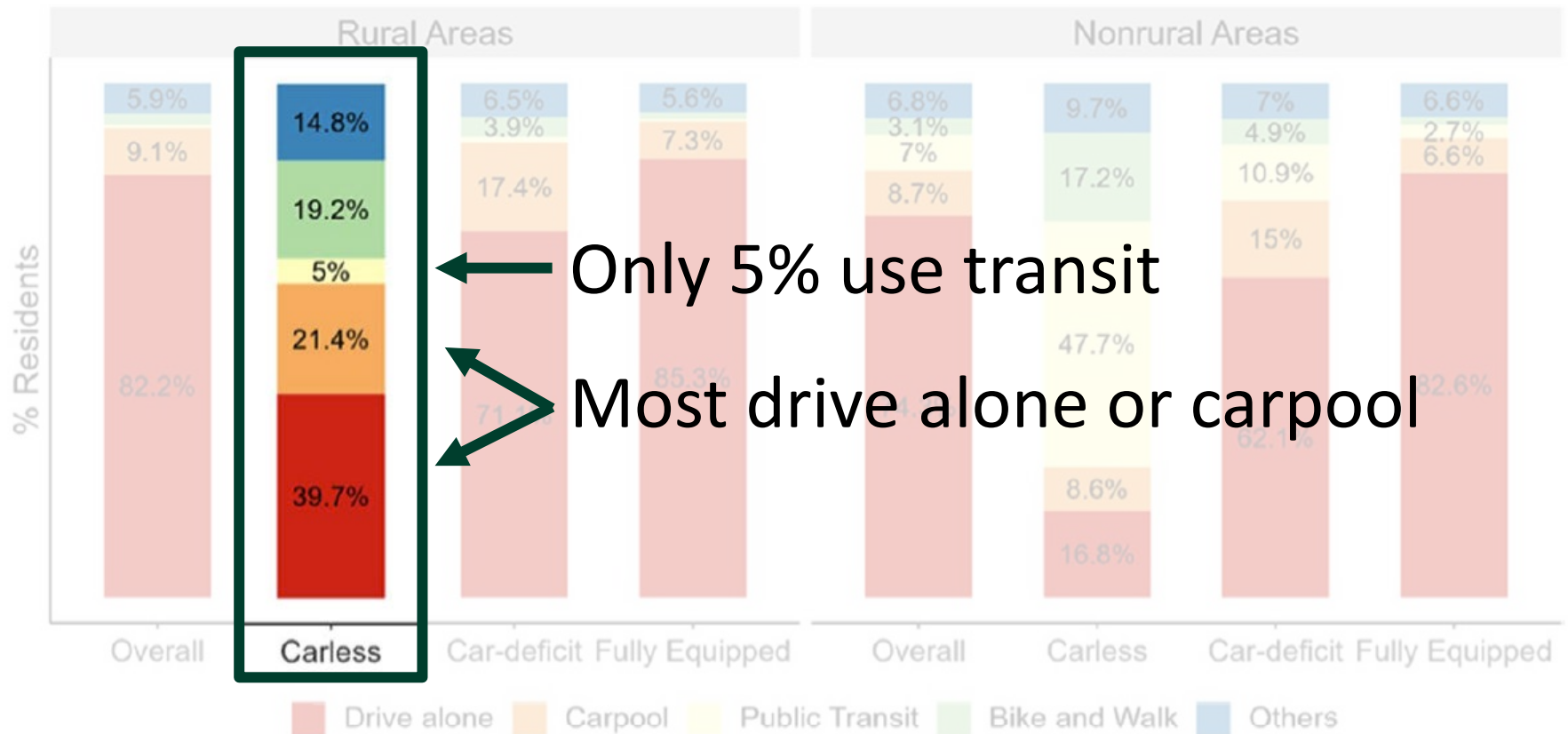
Where are rural people without cars?



How do rural people without cars get around?



How do rural people without cars get around?



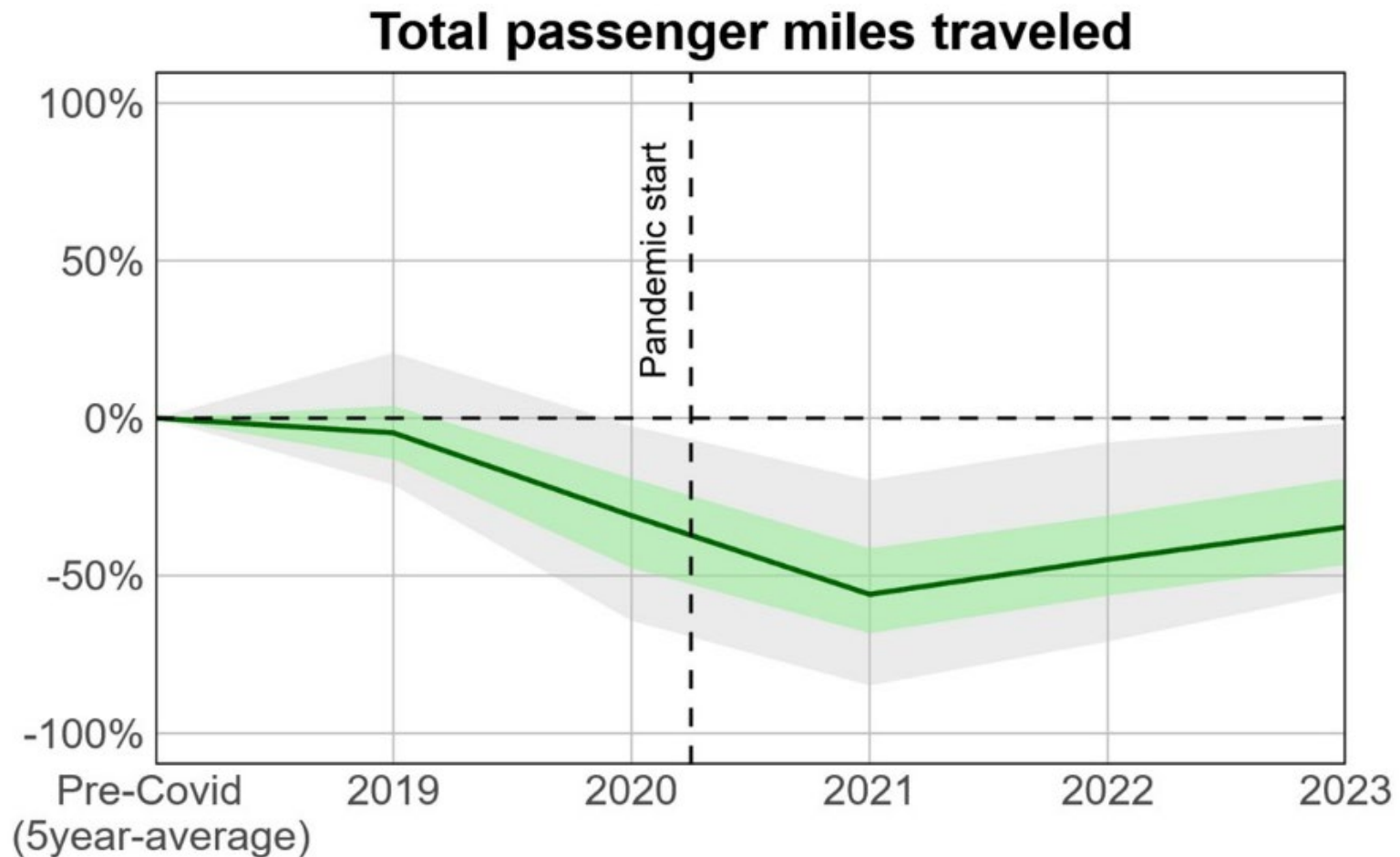
Challenges to providing rural transit

The fundamentals – efficiency and tradeoffs



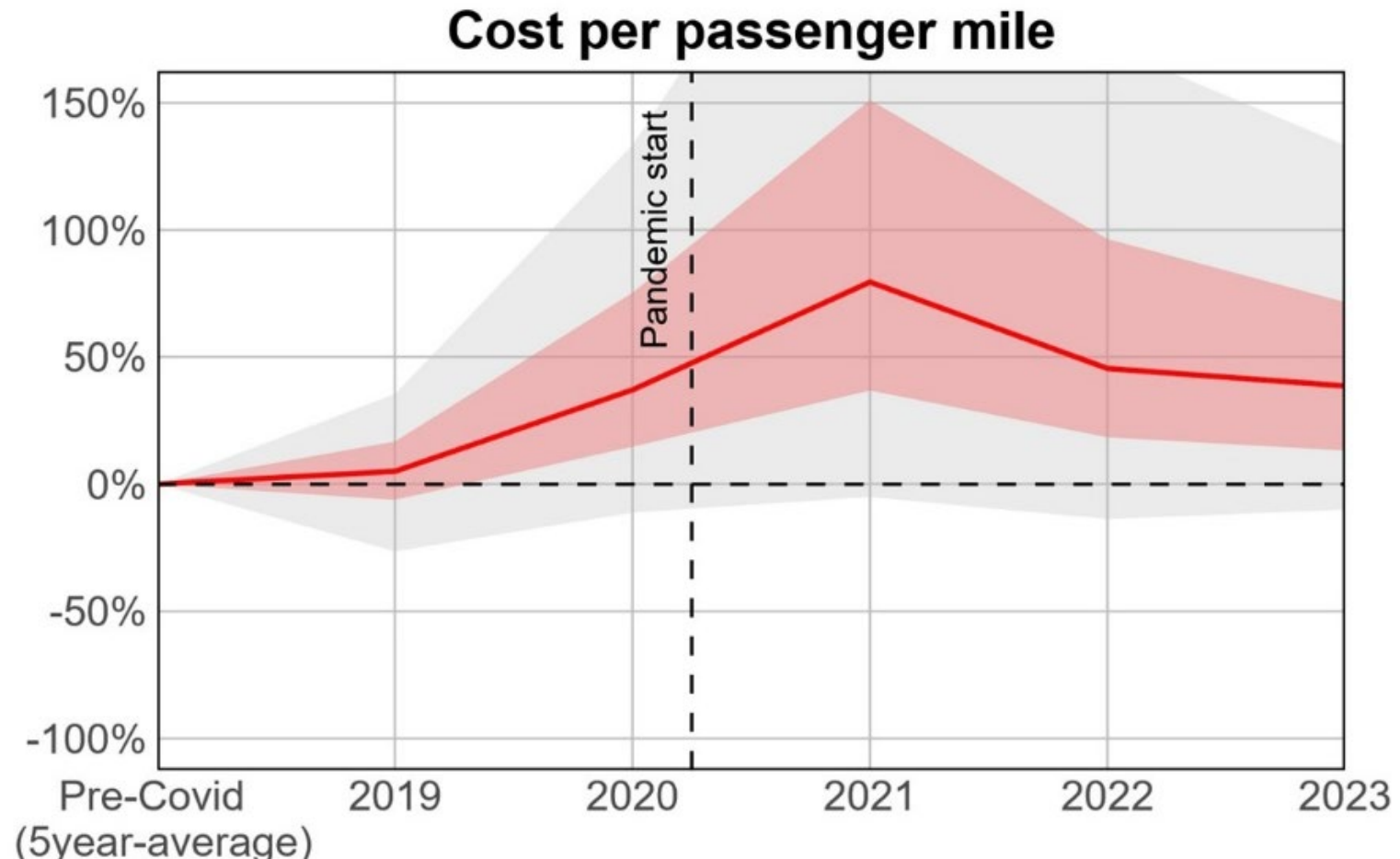
Challenges to providing transit in the US

The pandemic led to ridership decline



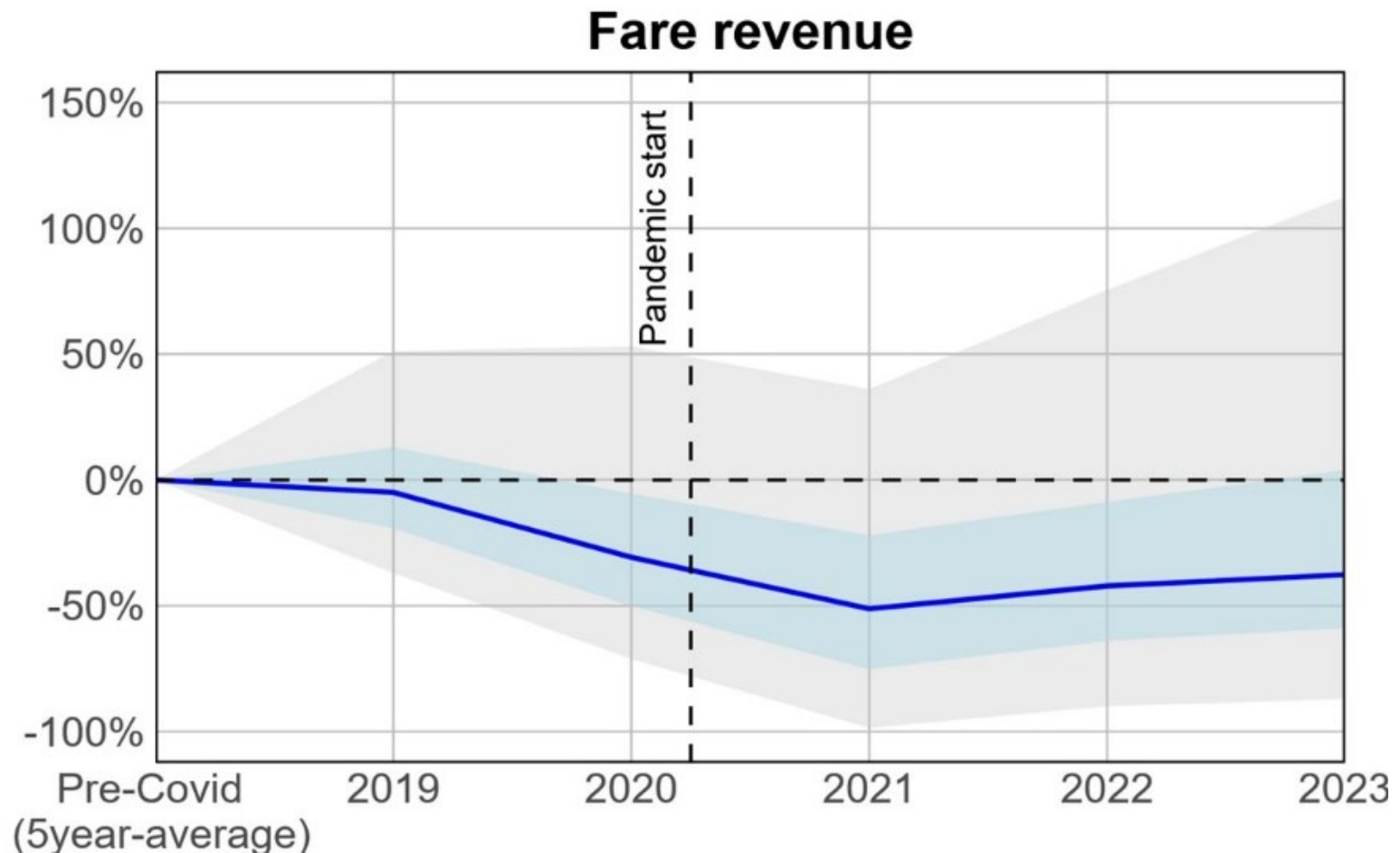
Challenges to providing transit in the US

... leading to declining efficiency



Challenges to providing transit in the US

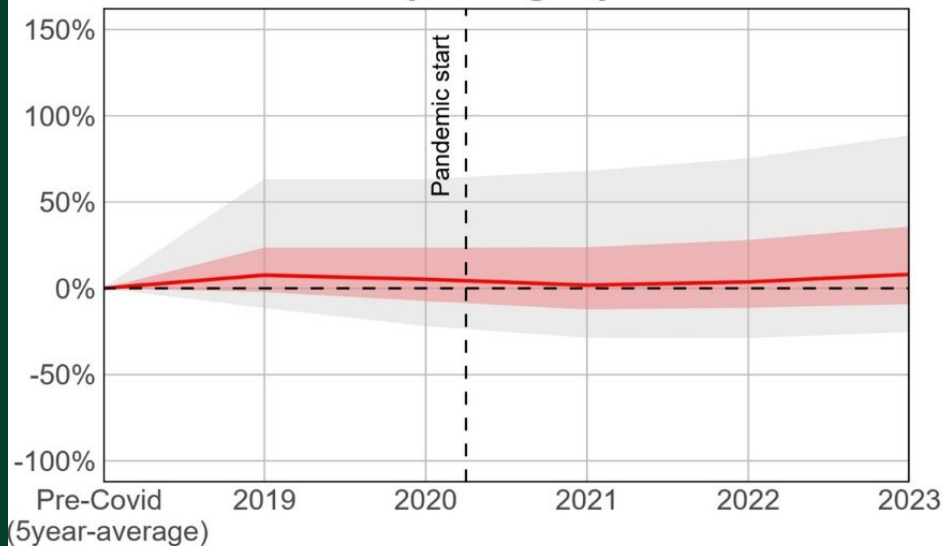
Fare revenue fell



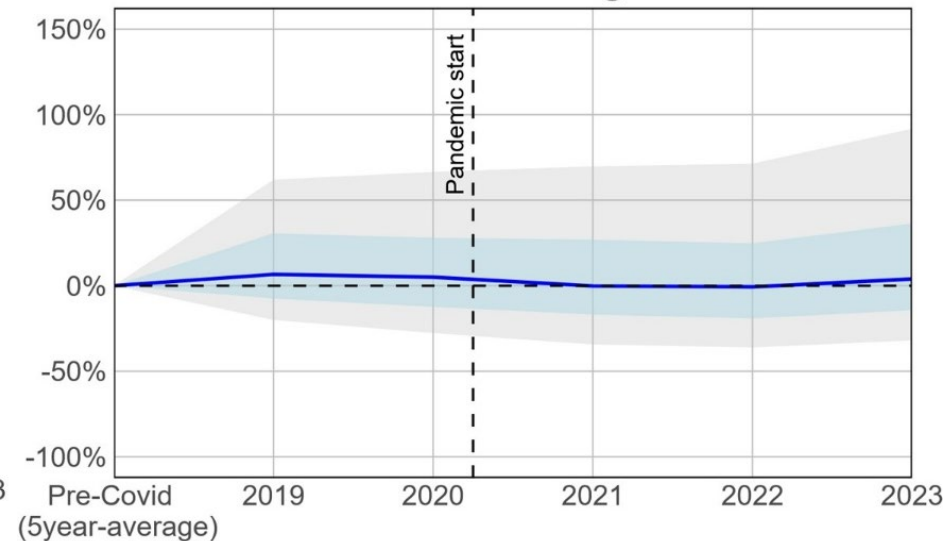
Challenges to providing transit in the US

While costs and total funding held steady

Total operating expenses

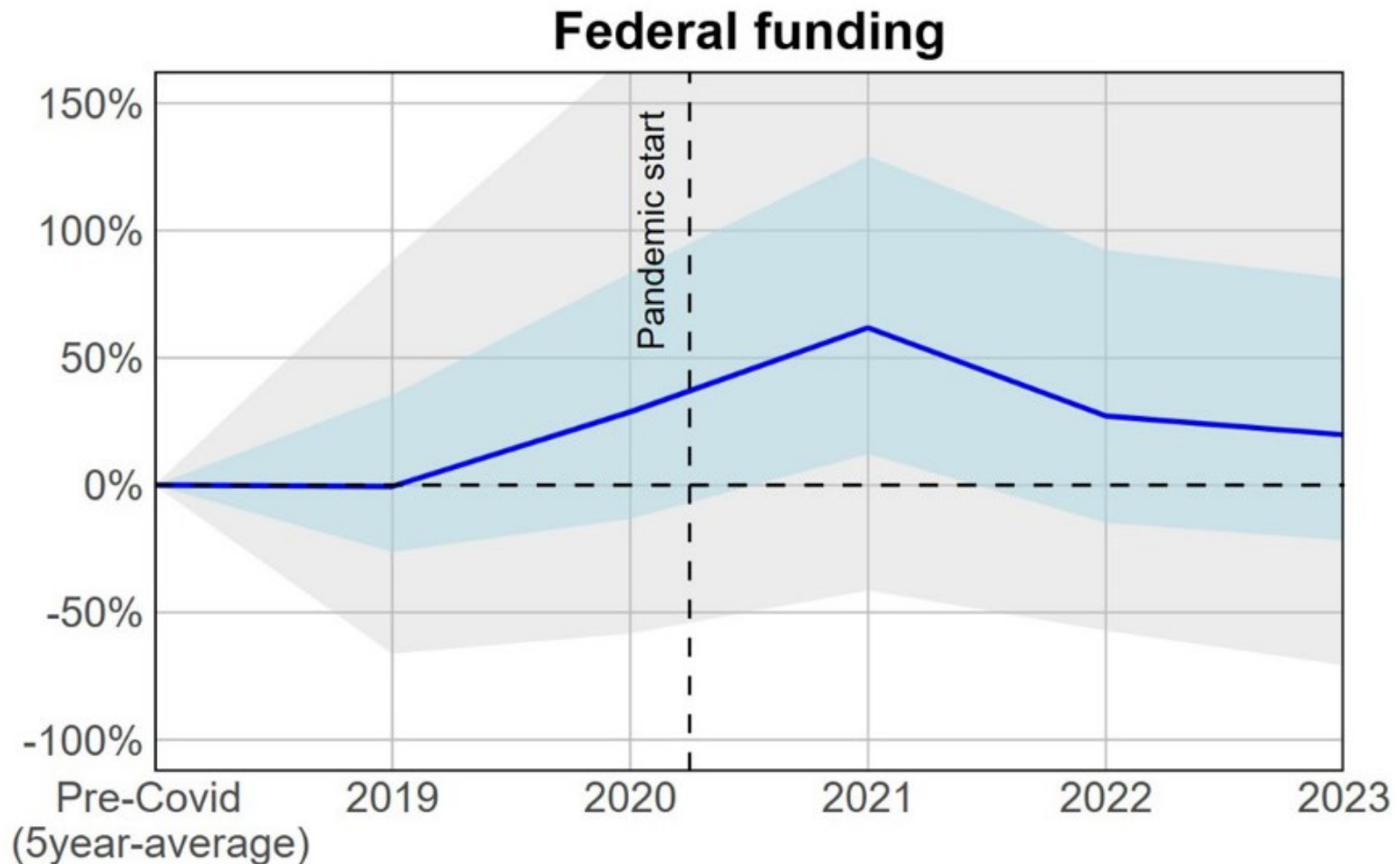


Total funding



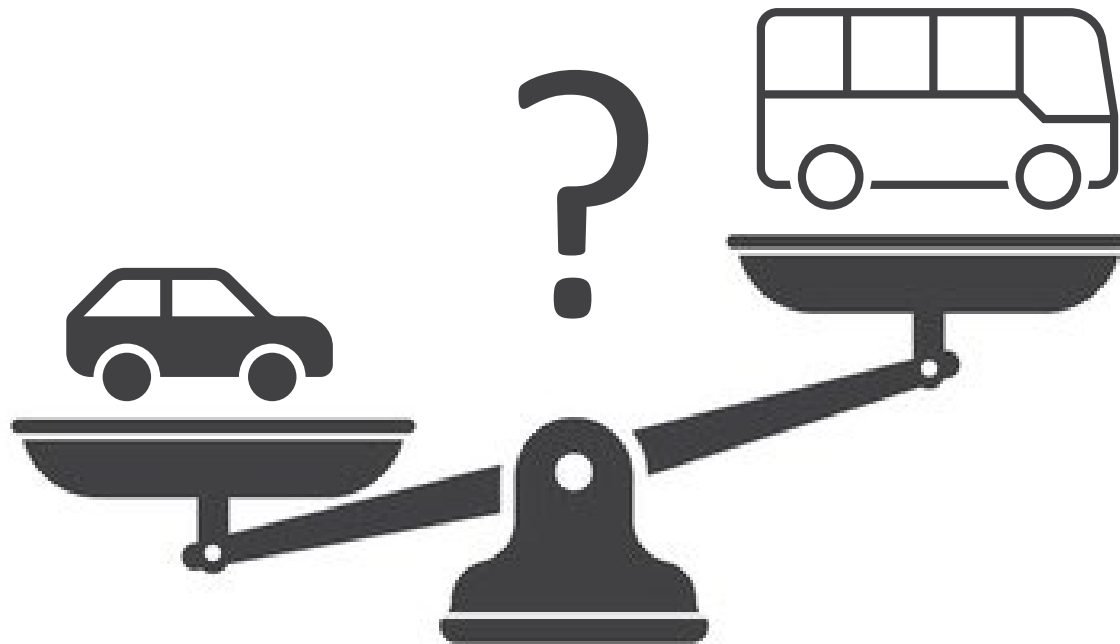
Challenges to providing transit in the US

...because the Federal government helped



Challenges to providing transit in the US

Federal funding priorities may shift

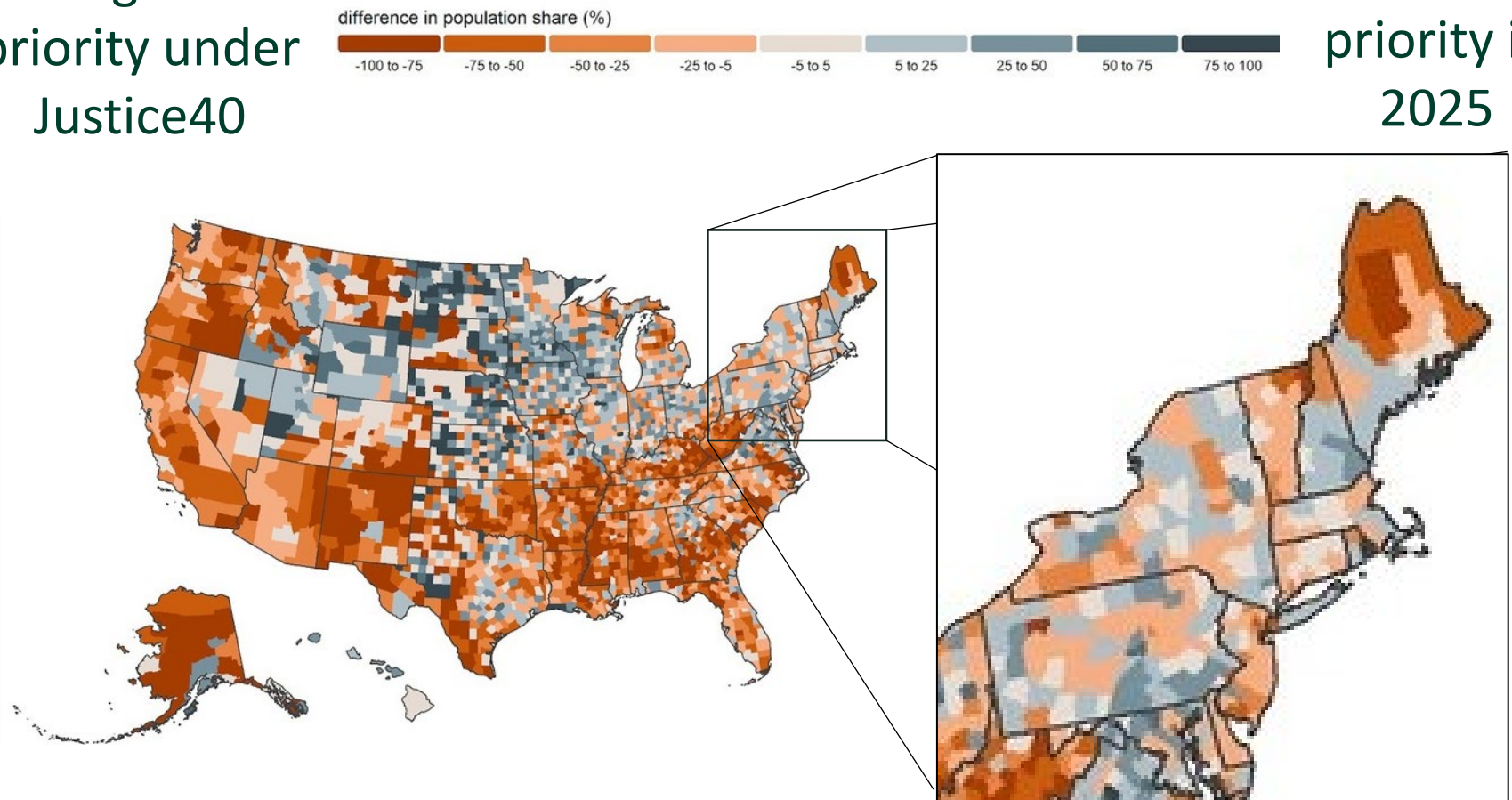


Challenges to providing transit in the US

US DOT discretionary funding priorities are shifting

Higher
priority under
Justice40

Higher
priority in
2025



Opportunities to improve rural transit

Adjust service

Optimize routes

Right-size vehicles

Improve immigrant access to native language information via trusted community networks

Pursue new funding

Partner with employers, healthcare providers, schools, foundations, and others with a shared interest in rural mobility

Innovate

New on-demand transit services in Vermont

- MyRide: Any trip for any person (Montpelier)
- Rides to Recovery and Jobs
- Rides to Wellness (piloted, discontinued)
- Gopher: No ride restrictions, EVs, novel funding model



Opportunities to *transform* rural transit in the long run

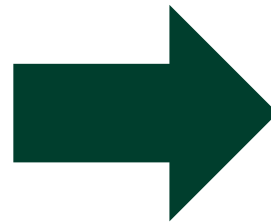
Preserve, invest, and grow in small town centers
(Link affordable housing, jobs, services, and transit)



Opportunities to *transform* rural transit in the long run

Supplement the transportation performance measures used
to allocate state and regional transportation spending

Mobility of Vehicles



Accessibility of People

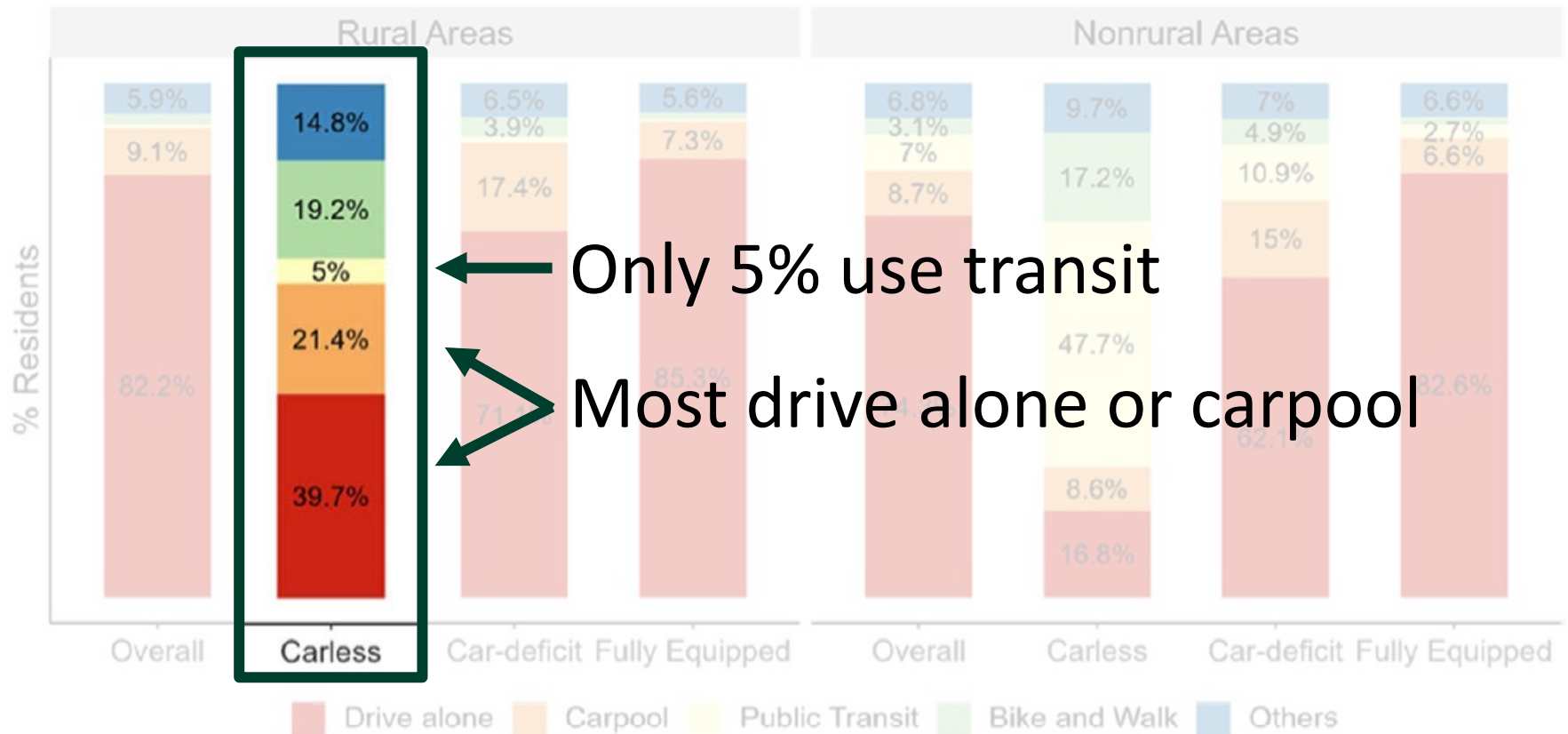


Accessibility Measures in Practice: A Guide for Transportation Agencies:

<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/26793/accessibility-measures-in-practice-a-guide-for-transportation-agencies>



How do rural people without cars get around?



Expand personal mobility options

Rideshare

Carshare

Vehicle
maintenance
programs

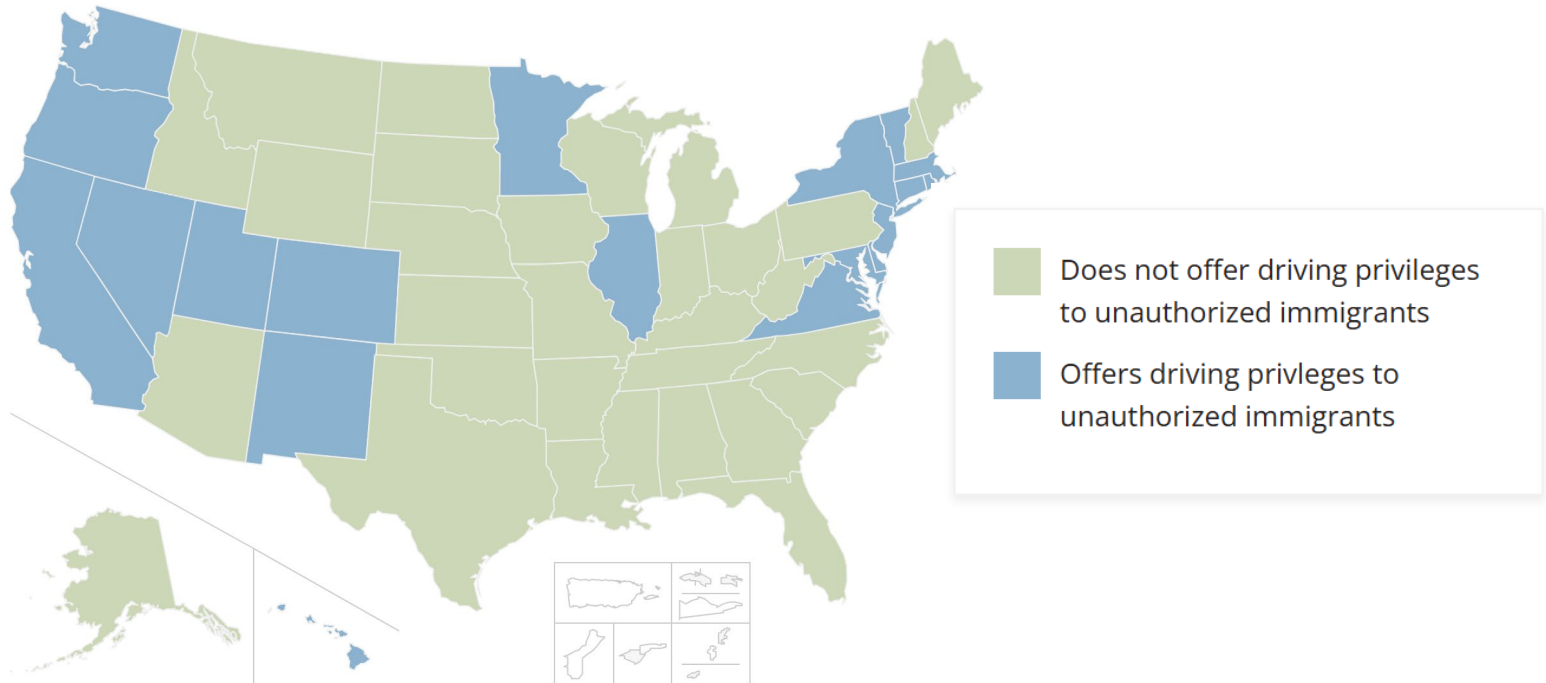


Expand personal mobility options

For immigrants:

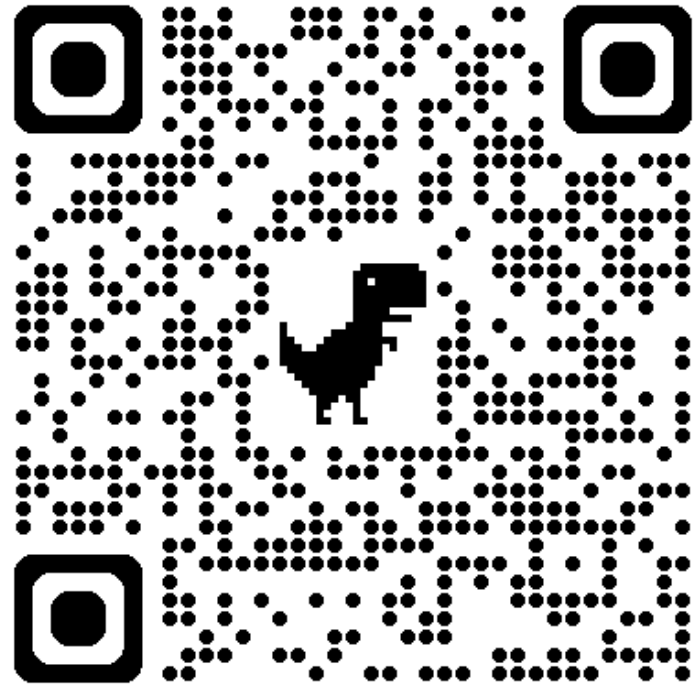
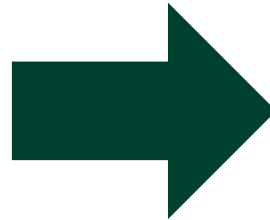
Adopt permissive drivers license laws

Provide native language information through trusted community networks



Thank you!

Presentation
slides



More information

- Policy brief on rural mobility needs: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/26j5r1w5>
- Transit trends in North America: Forthcoming paper (contact me for a copy)
- Changes in US DOT discretionary funding priorities:
<https://findingspress.org/article/132484-shifting-priorities-from-equity-to-exclusion-investigating-us-transportation-policy-changes-in-the-anti-dei-era/stats/all/pageviews>
- Accessibility Measures in Practice: A Guide for Transportation Agencies:
<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/26793/accessibility-measures-in-practice-a-guide-for-transportation-agencies>
- Novel transit services in Vermont:
 - MyRide <https://ridegmt.com/myride/>
 - Recovery and Job Access Rides <https://vtrans.vermont.gov/public-transit/recovery-job-access>
 - Gopher: <https://gophervt.org/>
- Rural Public Transportation and Maine: Review of State Best Practices:
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mcspc_transport/6/



VTrans' microtransit pilot programs

Dan Currier (Dan.J.Currier@vermont.gov) provided these updates:

Montpelier MyRide Microtransit Pilot KPI

October 2024

Transit Provider	Microtransit Region	Region Size (Sq. Miles)	Region Pop.	Pilot Start Date	Days/hours of Operation	Ave. Ridership per Day	Pilot Cost per Passenger	Ave. Wait Time for On-demand Requests (min.)	Ave. Time on Vehicle (min.)	# of Vehicles	% of Requested Trips Provided	% of Trips Booked Through App vs. Call Center	Ave. Number of Daily no Shows
GMT	Montpelier	12	8700	1/4/2021	7am-6pm, M-F - 8am-6pm Sat.	113 Average Overall/ 123 Weekday Average/ Sat Average 65	July:\$30.32, Aug:\$51.85	Not provided	11.4	3	50.4% Completed/ 90.2% Met Demand	Not provided	10.77

The grant for the Rides to Wellness has been used up and while the program did support riders to access wellness service it was not continued after the pilot was finished.

The Rides to Recovery and Jobs Access pilot was deemed successful and VTrans in partnership with VT Department of Health have continued the program. Not much has changed since we first started the program. Sorry I don't have ridership handy, but each transit agency is award about \$20,000 a year for trips to Recovery and Jobs Access. [Recovery and Job Access Rides | Agency of Transportation](#)



Vermont's Gopher program

Chris Cole (Chris@communityridesvt.org) provided this update:

Our pilot is trying to demonstrate several objectives:

- A shared mobility/ridesharing non-profit company can operate an all EV fleet
- What EV's are easier to operate across a broad range of drivers
- How fleets that are financed instead of purchased with FTA funds, can provide a range of services to the community and not violate federal regulations, including school and medical center transportation.
- We wanted to demonstrate that there is an unknown need for general public transportation services in a demand response model in rural Vermont.
- We wanted to have both a scheduled and on demand system for customers. If we have capacity in real time to share a ride, we make changes on the fly to accommodate if we can.
- We are beginning to roll out our individual market rate program for individuals who do not qualify for a subsidized ride (in most instances they live within walking distance to a bus route) and we are going to match those ride requests with an existing scheduled subsidized ride, thereby reducing the cost for the individual and the government program ride. We are also discussing reducing the rate for some of these rides by 25% when we can't pair them with a government trip.
- We also wanted to show that we can be integrated into the rural public transportation system as subrecipient to the regional provider to provide them additional capacity for their demand response programs as well.
- Our goal is to become self sufficient through a combination of government funds, institutional market rate trips and individual market based trips, once we get enough vehicles on the road to cover all of our expenses. Currently we cover our operating costs and some of our administrative costs through our operating revenues. Our billing rate is \$90 an hour.

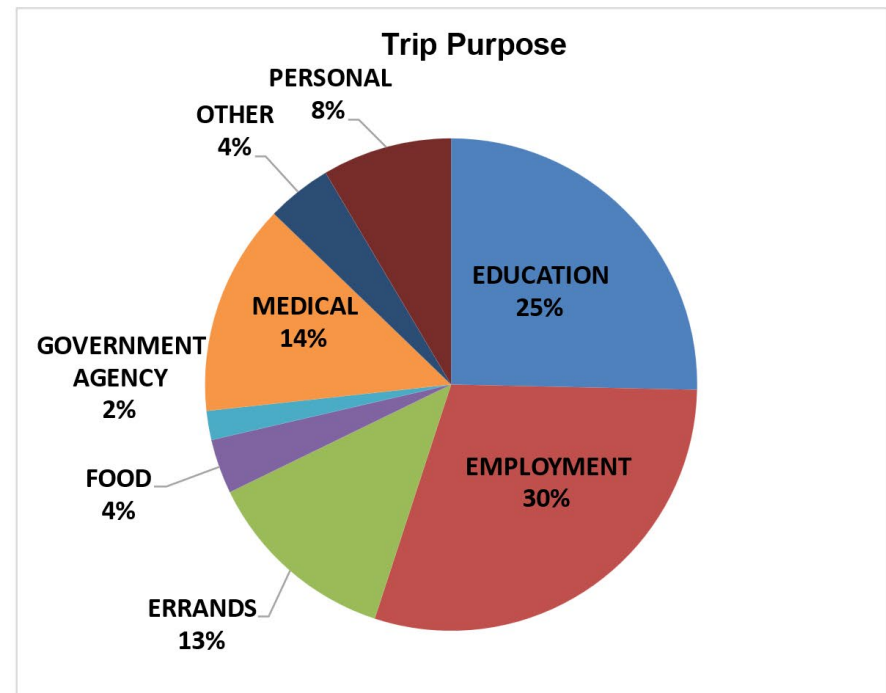


Vermont's Gopher program

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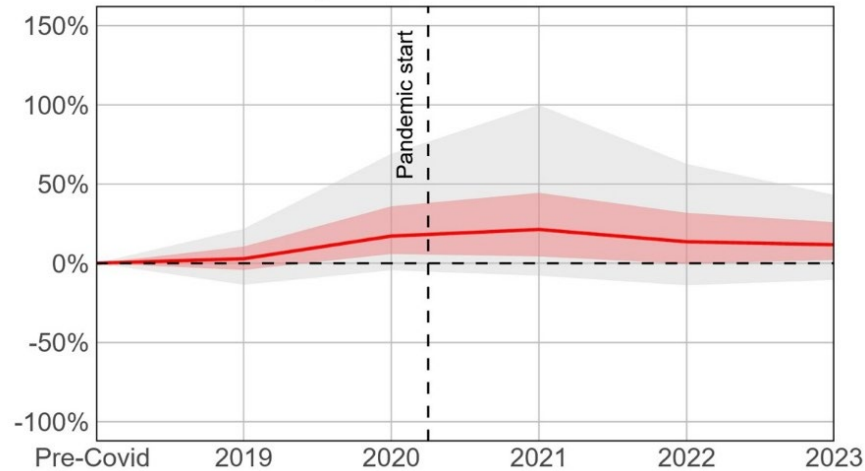
accomplishments

- # Trips 2023: **2,070**
 - # Trips 2024: **7,040**
- As of the end of 2024, Gopher has driven **148,276 emission free miles**

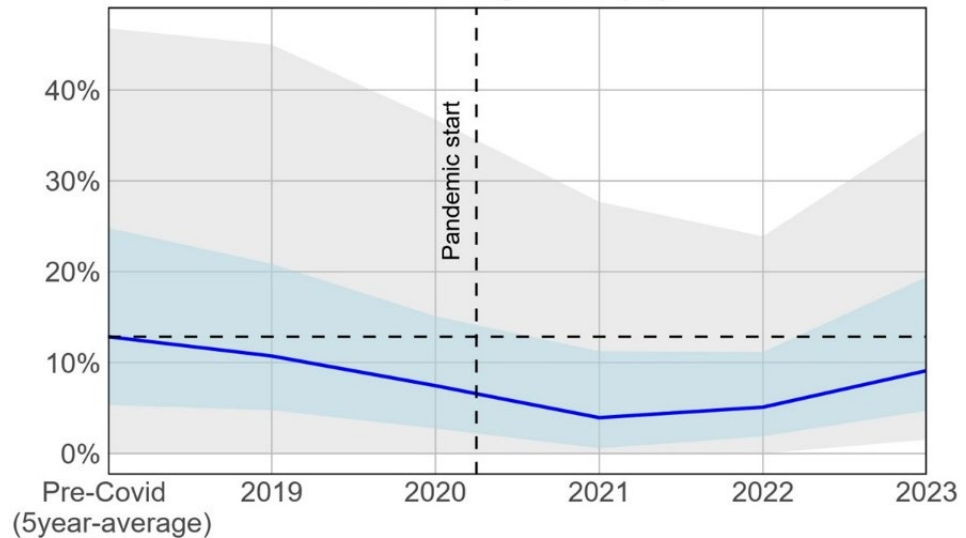


Transit trends in North America: Forthcoming paper (contact me for a copy)

Cost per vehicle revenue mile

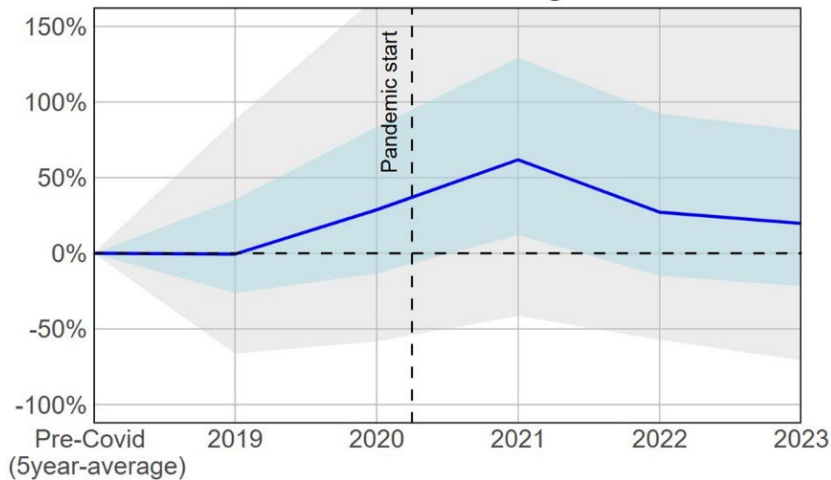


Recovery ratio (%)

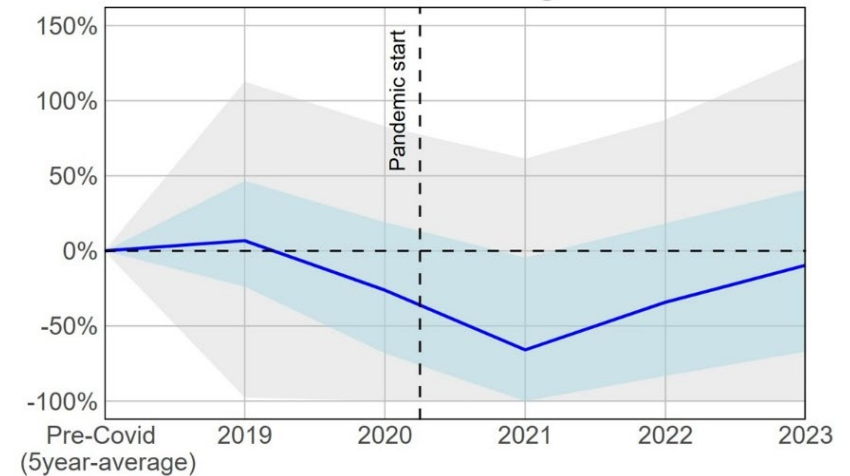


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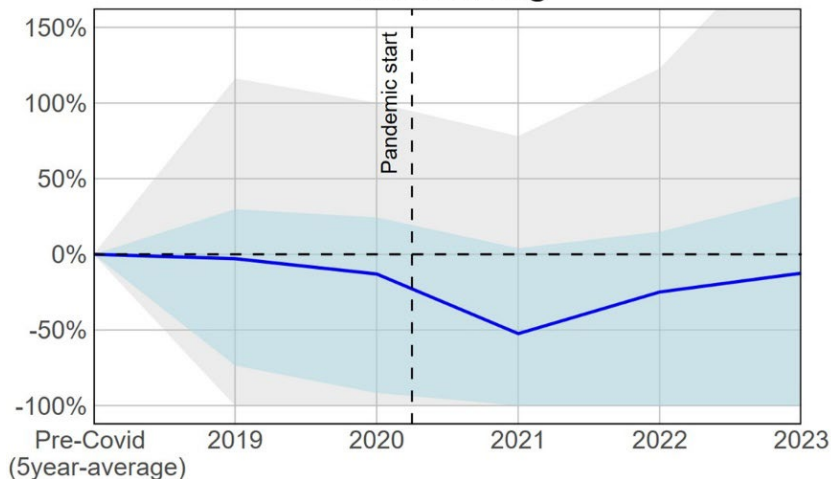
Federal funding



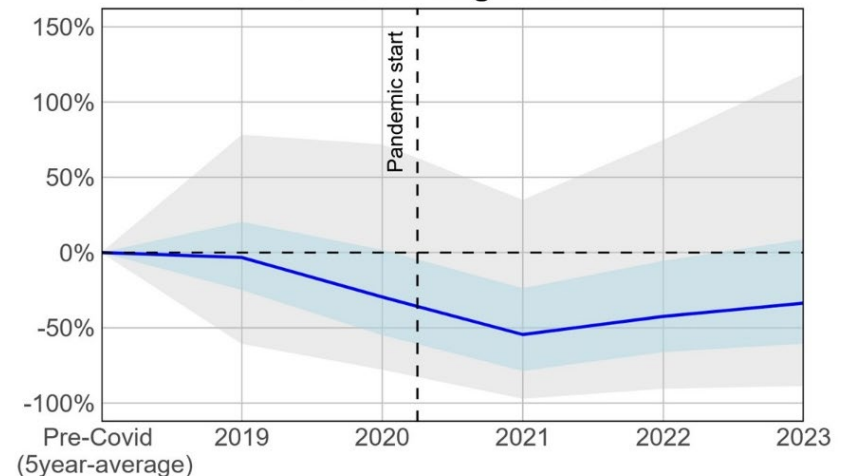
Local funding



State funding

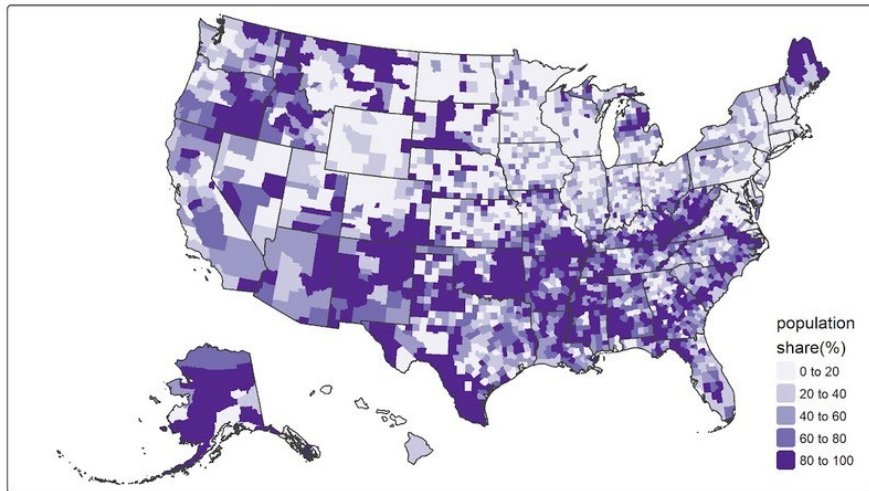


Other funding sources

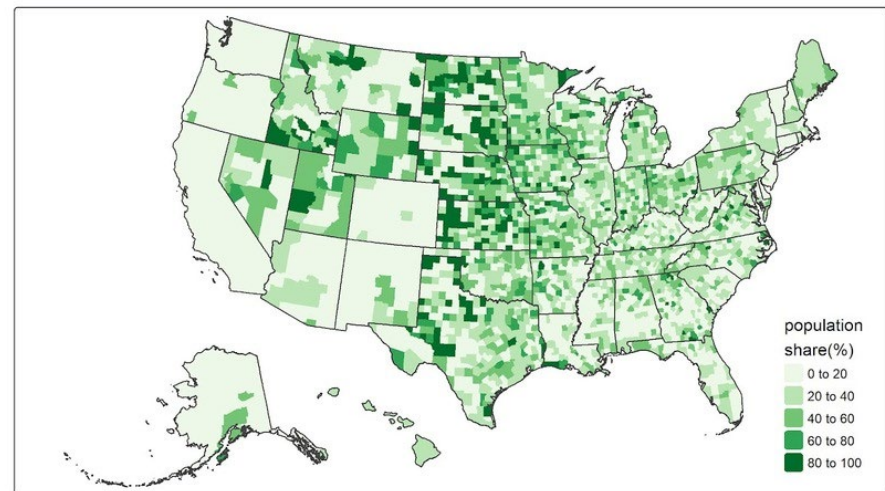


US DOT discretionary funding priorities

A. Justice40



B. 2025 DOT policy



<https://findingspress.org/article/132484-shifting-priorities-from-equity-to-exclusion-investigating-us-transportation-policy-changes-in-the-anti-dei-era>